

# Famous lost words

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**I**t is easy to forget how little of what was written in Ancient Greece and Rome survives today. But Matthew Wright shows that we can still learn a great deal, and have some fun with, the titles of these lost works, as well as fragments of them preserved as quotations or on scraps of papyrus.

Which lost work of Greek or Latin literature do you wish had survived? My own top candidate for retrieval is Euripides' lost tragedy *Andromeda*, which staged the story of Andromeda's thrilling rescue from a sea-monster and subsequent marriage to her saviour, Perseus. But it would also be wonderful to uncover Euripides' *Cretan Women*, all about Pasiphae's notorious liaison with the bull (which produced the Minotaur) – or Agathon's experimental *Antheus*, the only ancient tragedy in which the plot and characters were entirely made up – or Cratinus' *The Wine-Flask*, which beat Aristophanes' *Clouds* to first prize in the comic competition in 423 B.C. with Cratinus himself featured as a character.

## Nearly all ancient literature is lost

Such games provide a pleasant way of whiling away the time, but they remind us of a more depressing fact. Almost all Greek and Latin literature is lost, probably for ever. The authors and works that we read today represent only a fraction of what once existed: indeed, it can sometimes seem miraculous that any of them survived at all. We know of many more ancient authors and titles, but usually we have no way of knowing what the works contained, beyond a few intriguing glimpses. How much would one give to be able to read (for instance) Hecataeus' *World Tour*, Eudemus' *History of Theology*, Eupolis' *Spongers*, Callimachus' *Register of the Athenian Dramatic Poets*, Ennius' *Thyestes*, or Antonius Diogenes' novel *The Amazing Things Beyond Thule*?

Even the well-known authors wrote many texts which did not make it to our bookshelves. Ovid's tragedy *Medea* is probably one of the most famous literary losses of all time. Suetonius' works included such splendid titles as *On the Physical Defects of Mankind*, *Types of Roman Dress*, *Greek Terms of Abuse*, and *Lives of the Famous Whores*, though today

we have only the (admittedly rather good) *Lives of the Caesars*. In one of these *Lives*, Suetonius tells us that the emperor Augustus himself was the author of a thirteen-book *Autobiography*, not to mention a collection of *Epigrams* – both now lost, alas. Augustus also composed a tragedy, *Ajax*, which he came to detest and deliberately destroyed. (If Vergil's death-bed instructions had been carried out, the same fate would have befallen the *Aeneid* too.)

The Younger Pliny, in a marvellous letter, provides his correspondent Baebius Macer with a bibliography of his uncle's works, including not only titles but descriptions. This amounts to a fascinating 'reading list' of lost books, as well as a rare portrait of a Roman author at work. Works of the Elder Pliny's youth included a work *On Throwing the Javelin from Horseback*, but his prolific later years gave rise to a rhetorical handbook, a *History of Rome* from the point where Aufidius Bassus (another 'lost' author) left off, a twenty-volume *History of the German Wars* (which he wrote after encountering the ghost of Augustus' stepson Drusus Nero in a dream)... and of course the thirty-seven-volume *Natural History* which does, happily, survive. A less likely candidate for resurrection, perhaps, is Pliny's eight-volume *Problems in Grammar* – but after all, as his nephew reminds us, this book was composed during Nero's reign, when writers ran the risk of severe punishment for treating any subject which might be perceived as sensitive: grammar was boring but safe.

## Fragments

All of these titles are enormously intriguing. But our evidence for lost works is not limited to titles alone. In fact, many lost works exist in fragmentary form.

The word 'fragment', as used in this context, is potentially misleading, as it suggests literal fragmentation, comparable, say, to shards of pottery or glass.

Sometimes literary 'fragments' are indeed torn or decayed scraps of papyrus or parchment, discovered in the course of excavations (such as those at Oxyrhynchus, see p. 5). More often, though, 'fragments' are *quotations* from lost works, preserved in the writings of other ancient authors. Such quotations are referred to as 'book-fragments'. Similar to book-fragments are 'testimonia': a testimonium is any sort of ancient reference to a lost work which does not actually quote it word for word.

A typical example of a 'book-fragment' is provided by a few lines of Cratinus' *Wine-Flask* quoted by Athenaeus, author of the *Scholars at Dinner*. The point under discussion is an uncommon item of vocabulary. Athenaeus writes:

*Oxybaphon is the name for a type of drinking-cup, mentioned by Cratinus in The Wine-Flask: 'But how, oh how can anyone stop him drinking? I'll smash all his crockery and drinking-cups to pieces – he won't even have an oxybaphon to his name.'*

This quotation is printed in modern editions as 'Cratinus fragment 199'. Perhaps it is not as hilarious as we might wish, but it does at least help us to fill in some of the plot of the lost play, in which Cratinus appeared as a character and exploited his own reputation as an alcoholic with self-mocking humour.

'Book-fragments' are usually more satisfying for the reader, because the source-texts tend to quote complete sentences, and they do not have the frustrating gaps (*lacunae*) that papyrus fragments often do. But quotations can give a distorted impression of the lost work in question, because the author who quotes the words usually has some purpose other than simply giving his readers a representative flavour of the whole work. For example, Athenaeus, quoted above, is the main source for many of our fragments of lost Greek comedies, but his interests are mainly culinary. Thus it is easy to be left with the misleading impression that the comedians were exclusively concerned with food, drink, and recondite names for different types of fish! Similarly, many of the book-fragments of Greek tragedies come from ancient anthologies of quotations, which can make it seem as if the lost

tragedies were just collections of pithy (or banal) maxims: 'Life is uncertain'... 'Know thyself'... and so on.

Despite all the difficulties inherent in dealing with lost works, there is a flourishing branch of scholarship dedicated to this type of material. Indeed, there is a peculiar sort of appeal attached to fragments, which is somewhat like the appeal of archaeology or detective work. It is all about reconstruction and guesswork, which at times can come close to imaginative fiction, but which can be useful as well as enjoyable. What might these lost works have contained? Can we reconstruct plots and themes from a few fragments and testimonia? Can these detective activities shed light on the works which have survived? The results of such inquiries can be very revealing.

Some fragmentary works, and the conclusions which scholars have drawn from them, have been crucial for the study of the ancient world. To take just one example, the remains of Sophocles' satyr-play *The Trackers* tell us much that we would not otherwise know about the genre of satyr-drama: our only other surviving example is Euripides' *Cyclops*. (It has also inspired a brilliant modern adaptation by Tony Harrison.) Certain other genres of literature are known almost entirely through fragments. This is true of much early Greek poetry, including mime, dithyramb, iambus, elegy, and other lyric poetry (of which more below), and of Roman drama apart from Terence, Plautus, and Seneca. Without our limited knowledge of these lost writings, our overall view of ancient literature would be poorer by far.

We must remember, however, that all is *not* lost; and texts do miraculously resurface from time to time. Papyrus finds in recent history have given us many substantial fragments – and (better still) complete works by Bacchylides and Menander. Archaeological sites such as the 'Villa of the Papyri' at Herculaneum have thrown up 'new' works by the first-century B.C. philosopher Philodemus and others, and there is every hope that more will be discovered in future. In the meantime, the most important thing to remember is that what remains of classical literature is only the tip of the iceberg.

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